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# Huck Finn: Born to Trouble

KATHERINE SCHULTEN

**I**n 1995, a group of African American students in Cherry Hill, New Jersey—eleventh graders who had previously been A students—suddenly began failing tests and quizzes in their English class. As long as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was being taught, they said, they would no longer do the work. ■ Before assigning it, their teacher had not mentioned that the book was controversial, nor had she noted the 200-plus instances of the word “nigger” in the novel. As a result, says one African American student, no one was prepared for the power of the word in class. White students would nervously “snicker” or “turn

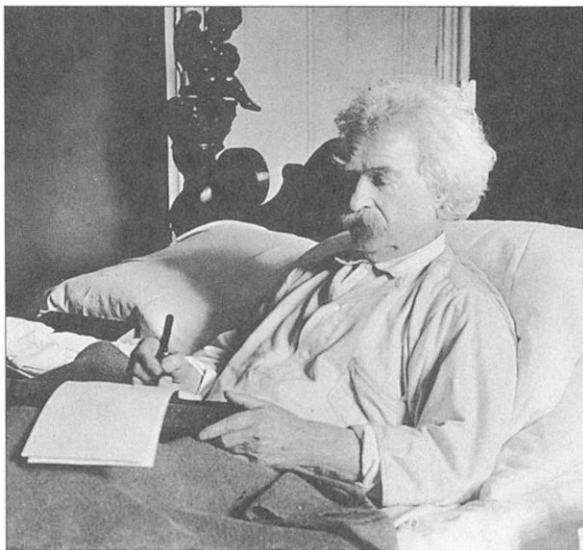
around and stare” at the few African American students when the word was read aloud. The African American students, for their part, felt too self-conscious to speak up or ask their teacher for help. Instead, they went home and told their parents. Long frustrated with the lack of multicultural content in the district’s curricula in general, their parents decided it was time to act. If nothing changed in Cherry Hill, one parent recalled, “we knew we’d have a firestorm on our hands.”

This is the story of how the Cherry Hill school district responded to the formal challenge the parents ultimately brought against *Huck Finn*. Instead of ignoring the protests or taking the novel off reading lists and library shelves, as many other school districts have done, this school district chose to bring parents, students, teachers, administrators, and scholars together to negotiate a solution. It took nearly a year of emotional debate to do it, but in the end they found a way to teach *Huck Finn* that addressed each group’s concerns. And Cherry Hill as a whole, they say, is stronger for it. The relationship between the minority community and the school is stronger and closer. “[That’s] one of the best things that came out of this,” says the same parent who worried at first that there would be a “firestorm.”

Assistant Superintendent Richard Levy agrees. “It has been a win-win for everyone,” he says.

In 1998 staff from public television station WGBH in Boston heard a presentation about the Cherry Hill experience at an education conference. At the time, WGBH was beginning work on Culture Shock, a series of four documentaries about controversial art that will air on PBS in January/February 2000. One of the films, *Born to Trouble: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, examines the history of debate that has followed the novel from the time it was first published in 1885 to the present. WGBH chose to feature the Cherry Hill story as a case study in a teacher’s guide for the film. The guide recounts the story of the Cherry Hill challenge and its resolution, explains how Cherry Hill managed to bring so many different groups to consensus, and includes an expanded and adapted version of the classroom curriculum. Although teachers of *Huck Finn* will find the story especially helpful, WGBH hopes that educators who are facing challenges over any kind of controversial material can learn from this community’s experience.

When WGBH’s Educational Print and Outreach Department first asked me to write the teacher’s guide, I was secretly sure that I would



Mark Twain. Courtesy of The Mark Twain Project, The Bancroft Library.

go to Cherry Hill and find more problems than solutions. As a former English teacher who had taught *Huck Finn* many times, I just didn't believe that a curriculum written by a committee as a response to political pressure could possibly be worthwhile. At worst I expected it to sacrifice intellectual rigor for well-meaning but simplistic exercises on multicultural harmony. At best I thought it might be high-minded but dull. Instead what I found was a curriculum that is not only sensitively written and intellectually challenging, but also imaginative and engaging for students. *Huck Finn* had been put in a new context, one that explores the controversy—and with it issues of race, stereotyping, power, heroism, and self-definition—by embedding the traditional ways of teaching the novel in a rich historical and cultural framework.

For several days in February and March of this year I interviewed the different groups—teachers, parents, administrators, and professors—who put the Cherry Hill curriculum together. In addition to observing it being taught in classes at the two Cherry Hill high schools, I took students and teachers aside and asked them what they really thought about the curriculum. And what was most remarkable about the whole experience was how often each group mentioned how much respect they had come to have for the other groups, especially given how far apart they had been at the beginning. This is an excellent unit and a wonderful answer to the community's dilemma, they all told

me, but it never could have happened if the other people hadn't been so open-minded.

## What Happened in Cherry Hill

Cherry Hill, New Jersey, is a middle-class community located just across the Delaware River from Philadelphia. A suburb that was nearly all white in the early 1980s, it is now 20 percent African American, Latino, and Asian. Like many communities, Cherry Hill has had to learn how to integrate different cultures and how to raise consciousness about the perspectives of minorities in a place where, until recently, so-called "minority issues" were only something to read about in the newspaper. In 1996, when Cherry Hill parents and their children first confronted teachers and administrators, neither side believed they'd ever find common ground.

"The group of us and the teachers sat across from each other, diametrically opposed, and there was so much tension you could cut it with a knife," remembers Pat McCargo, parent of one of the students and a member of the Cherry Hill Minority Civic Association (CHMCA), the group that eventually brought the official challenge to the board of education.

Concerned about intellectual freedom, many teachers declared that they would never teach a book as a "tool for political purposes." If parents were allowed to dictate how to teach this book, the teachers asked, where would they draw the line? But as students rose to speak and told their teachers what they hadn't been able to say in class, that reading *Huck Finn* made them feel conspicuous and ashamed, "we could actually see the teachers putting themselves in the kids' shoes," says parent Bill McCargo. "What we found wasn't so much racism as misunderstanding," he adds. "At long last they finally understood."

For all the groups, the most important thing to come out of that first meeting was an agreement that no one wanted to ban the book. There was also consensus that student learning was the first priority, beyond the philosophical questions of censorship and intellectual freedom. As parent Danny Elmore commented at the time, "If [students] shut down, we haven't done anything."

A committee representing each group was formed, and a reading list addressing the controversy was created. Three African American professors from nearby Villanova University, each an expert in

African studies, African American history, or nineteenth century literature, were invited to work with the committee. In the end, it was decided that not only would a new curriculum be written, but all Cherry Hill teachers wishing to teach the novel in the future would be required to attend a one-day workshop given by the Villanova professors. There they would be given the historical, cultural, and literary resources to see the novel in a new light.

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On the night in 1997 when the committee presented its final report to the board of education, television photographers came from stations all over New Jersey. "They were expecting a big fight," says Richard Levy. "What they found was a resolution to a very challenging problem."

### **Creating the Curriculum**

The Cherry Hill curriculum was primarily developed by English teachers Matthew Carr and Sandy Forchion. They worked throughout the summer of 1997 to balance the interests of all the groups while creating something that would remain true to the meaning of the novel and, most importantly, would work in the high school classroom. Sandy's position was unique: "I was a black English teacher who was against censorship but who had despised the way *Huck Finn* was taught to me when I was in school." Matt says that his desire to get involved hinged on learning early on that this challenge to *Huck Finn* was "not just some current 'PC' thing" but an issue that had been raised continuously over the last forty years.

"I realized this was long-term and had caused deep-rooted anger and pain," he says.

The CHMCA officially objected to *Huck Finn* on the grounds that "the prejudicial effect of the racial characterizations outweigh any literary value that the book might have." This objection is shared by most of the challenges brought against the book since 1957, when the NAACP charged that *Huck Finn* contained "racial slurs" and "belittling racial designations." Since then, the book has been called "racist" for both the pervasive use of the word "nigger" and its portrayal of blacks that is considered stereotypical and demeaning.

Cherry Hill parents had additional worries. Most importantly, they were concerned that Jim would never seem like a true hero to African American children because he does not resist slavery. As Sandy notes, "Jim is not heroic to black kids. In the end he is being controlled by a white boy. He is not a man, he is an emasculated man. They [the students] want to see Nat Turner."

"We tried to translate the parents' concerns into our curriculum," says Sandy. "We looked for demeaning areas, places where students might find the portrayal of blacks laughable." They then countered these passages with documents from the period that give additional background. They believe students will be less likely to dismiss Jim's superstitions as simple-minded, for example, if they understand them in the context of slave life and religion. Ending the unit with a look at slave narratives, such as Frederick Douglass's autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, helps students look at forms of resistance and opens a discussion about whether "wearing a mask," as Jim does, is as valid a form of resistance as any other.

The resulting curriculum (see appendix) was written specifically to respond to these objections. Most English teachers will recognize that the heart of the curriculum still deals with most of the literary aspects of *Huck Finn* that have traditionally been taught. The curriculum is divided into six sections and can be taught, depending on the needs of the class, as a six to eight week unit. Each section contains its own bibliography, with recommended readings for teachers and students; a series of discussion questions; and a variety of hands-on classroom activities. (*Huck Finn In Context: A Teaching Guide* presents the complete curriculum, as adapted by WGBH, and includes an extensive bibliography and teaching tips.) Instructors can choose from a

range of resources and activities for each major topic covered in each section.

### Using the New Curriculum in the Classroom

Because it is only in its first year of use, the Cherry Hill teachers emphasize that their curriculum is still “a work in progress,” but in the classes I observed, students seemed eager and interested. “Knowing about the controversy beforehand is definitely making me more curious as I read,” one student said as his class began the unit.

Although some students complained that the controversy seemed overblown in the first place (“We don’t get enough credit for understanding things. We could have read it without all of this,” one commented), many seemed to appreciate the richer context of the new curriculum. One student told me it was the first time in his predominantly white school experience that he thought seriously about race. As they read the novel, he said, “I remember looking around the classroom for the first time and thinking [how it might feel to read a book] from a different background besides white.” Another student said, “I think the impact of this book is in the discomfort the readers feel . . . *Huck Finn* is perfect to read if it’s taught correctly. In this class we learned through sympathy.”

In Sandy’s class several students—African American, white, and Asian—said, after learning about the controversy (but before reading the book itself), that they thought the book should not be

taught. Although she is only halfway through the curriculum at this writing, Sandy believes they’ve changed their minds. She sees an intense “thoughtfulness” on the faces of most of her students that is markedly different from the way they seemed to experience other books. “I see them looking at me, nodding their heads, attentive in a different way,” she notes. “One young lady approached me after a class [on the historical roots of racism] and said, ‘There really is a lot to this, isn’t there?’ And I know just what she means.”

After I interviewed Matt Carr’s juniors, one of the first groups of students to finish the new curriculum, the main weakness I detected was that the connections between the different sections were not necessarily clear to the students. (This has been addressed in the WGBH version of the curriculum.) But Matt now reports that his students, reflecting at the end of the year on two semesters of American literature, say *Huck Finn* and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* were the most interesting and effective texts they read all year. They also seem to have made connections that are beyond what Matt had hoped. “One key thing we’ve worked on all year is the particularly American concept of self-definition—that [America] is the place where you can take control of yourself, of language, and shape your own destiny. Teaching [these texts] in this new context really allowed them to see that. Many of them spoke of Huck and Frederick Douglass as metaphors for reclaiming the sense of self,” Matt says.

Although Cherry Hill teachers say they will continue to “tinker” with the curriculum, they also say they are “very satisfied” with how it has worked in the classroom its first year. Nearly all the teachers in the district seem to feel the new curriculum is both rich and balanced, even though some have declined to teach the book. One of these teachers finds the new curriculum “brilliant” but won’t teach the book because, he says, “If we take away the English teacher’s ability to apply judgment to a work of literature, we’re just delivery machines . . . we might as well be on videotape.”

Although Matt and Sandy sympathize with this point of view, Sandy says, “For me it’s hard to understand those teachers who don’t want to change, even after kids come to you and say they’re hurt and want to stay out of class. How can you not find a way to address that?” Other teachers felt strongly enough about *Huck Finn* remaining in the



“Huck on Raft.” Illustrator: Elliott Banfield for WGBH.

high school canon to try the new curriculum. As Marge Kraemer, English teacher at Cherry Hill West, puts it, "I'd rather change my approach to a novel than lose the right to teach it."

And at least one teacher who was initially wary of what she saw as "sensitivity training" is now grateful. "I'm glad I had to do this," she says. "I didn't think I needed [the workshop], but it did make me more sensitive. Racism is the worst problem in our society. I want to teach the kids to be heroes the way Huck is a hero when he tears up that letter and realizes that Jim is a man. Like Huck, they have to learn to make decisions by themselves, no matter what our society says."

## Notes

1. Culture Shock, which will air on PBS in January/February 2000, is a series of four documentaries that examines and celebrates the arts and their role in society. *Born to Trouble: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* presents the 100-year old history of the controversy surrounding the novel. *The Shock of the Nude: Manet's Olympia* looks at the scandal that surrounded the Paris 1865 exhibition of one of Manet's most famous paintings. *The Devil's Music: 1920s Jazz* explores the resistance jazz faced in its early years and how it came to be accepted as an American classic. *Hollywood Censored: Movies, Morality & the Production Code* looks at the impact of movies and whether or not their content can reflect or cause social behavior.

2. *Huck Finn in Context: A Teaching Guide* will be available free in October 1999 from WGBH, Educational Print and Outreach, 125 Western Avenue, Boston, MA 02134. (A Culture Shock teacher's guide is also available.) A *Huck Finn* course-pack, containing the guide, the videotape of *Born to Trouble: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and reprints of the recommended readings for the curriculum will be available in February 2000 at cost by writing to WGBH at the above address.

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## APPENDIX: THE "Huck Finn in Context" Curriculum

### Section I: Exploring the Controversy

Essential as an introduction to the curriculum, this section uses discussion questions and activities to prepare students before they read the novel for the racial issues they will encounter. It also includes a brief history of the controversy and an introduction to issues of censorship and intellectual freedom; a suggested lesson on the word "nigger" and its connotations (which can also be used with any other work in which epithets are an issue); and activities that connect the controversy over *Huck Finn* to other arts controversies.

### Section II: Behind the Mask: Exploring Stereotypes

This section tackles the charge that Jim is more a stereotype than a fully realized character. Students look at the historical roots of African American plantation stereotypes such as "Sambo" and "Nat" through readings or by watching Marlon Riggs's

classic documentary *Ethnic Notions*. To add a contemporary angle, one of the activities suggests that students compare some of these stereotypes with current portrayals of African Americans.

### **Section III: The Development of Character in *Huck Finn***

The conventional approach to teaching *Huck Finn* assumes that Huck is the hero and center of the story and considers Jim primarily in relation to Huck and his moral growth. Although both Huck and Jim are thoroughly explored in this section, students are here asked to consider a new paradigm—that Jim is the central character, the one who humanizes Huck and allows him, in the words of Maghan Keita, one of the Villanova professors, “to rise to heroic proportions.” Students assess Jim by applying what they have learned about stereotypes, and through activities in which, for example, they write or role play scenes from Jim’s point of view rather than Huck’s.

### **Section IV: The Novel as Satire**

This section explores satire as a literary device through the lens of the controversy. Questions about authorial intent, Huck as narrator, and Twain’s satire as commentary on a slaveholding society are all considered in thinking about whether or not the novel is racist. Students also look closely again at the use of “nigger” in the novel.

### **Section V: Reclaiming the Self: the Legacy of Slavery**

The Cherry Hill teachers feel that ending the unit with slave narratives such as Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* or *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs is essential to teaching the novel in a fuller context. Many of the teachers say it is one of the most successful aspects of the unit. Students respond very strongly to Douglass or Jacobs and use their writings to look back at Twain’s novel. Activities concentrate on bringing out the rich connections between the texts.

### **Section VI: Final Projects**

To wrap up the unit, students choose final projects from a variety of possibilities, from putting Mark Twain or the book on trial, to writing an updated Huck and Jim story, to making a presentation to a board of education for or against the book, to tracing the legacy of slavery today.